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ABSTRACT

This article for early childhood administrators specifies guidelines and issues to be considered in the implementation of a comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention program. It also offers some ideas for what should be done if an allegation of sexual abuse is made against a staff member of a child care facility. Discussion focuses on six aspects of the comprehensive prevention program, including: (1) classroom policies and strategies; (2) in-service teacher training, committee work, and orientation to all components of the prevention program; (3) a personal safety curriculum for children; (4) parent-teacher dialogues and meetings; (5) administrative policies and procedures; and (6) an administrator's plan for coping with an allegation of institutional child sexual abuse. It is concluded that much professional growth in proactive abuse prevention work can be achieved in preparation for instances of child abuse. Secondary outcomes of such preparation include increased staff awareness, professional engagement, program and policy development, evaluation of classroom practices, and protection of staff from allegations. (RH)

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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: GUIDELINES FOR PROTECTION AND PREVENTION IN CHILD CARE SETTINGS

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All child care administrators can realistically expect that they will someday need to respond to allegations of sexual abuse in their programs. This is not an entirely negative state of affairs, but it is one that commands us to grow as Early Childhood professionals. If, as child advocates, we are to be successful in protecting children, we must do all that we can to encourage the reporting of child abuse and neglect. This means educating staff and parents in recognizing symptoms and developing procedures for filing reports. Since we know that child sexual abuse frequently produces symptoms that are similar to those caused by other stressors in children's lives (e.g., divorce, death of a family member, and moving), and because media attention has focused so heavily on abuse of children in the day care programs, we can anticipate that our efforts will result in allegations of abuse where none has occurred. But if we are willing only to report the obvious cases of child abuse, we may not be paying sufficient attention to children who are being exploited in more subtle ways. To fully protect children, we must encourage the reporting of all suspicions of child abuse, however slight, and we must support the ensuing investigations, however disruptive. We must do so recognizing fully that our actions may actually increase the number of false allegations against our own programs.

Anyone who has been through an abuse investigation knows that when an allegation is made, program administrators have no time to plan how to respond. Staff rapidly get caught up in the emotionality of the issues.

Advocating for better child protection does not, however, mean that we should be sitting ducks for the unpredictability and stress of full scale child abuse investigations. The purpose of this article is twofold: to provide some guidelines and issues for Early Childhood programs to consider in setting up a comprehensive Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program and to offer some ideas and "choice points" to consider, preferably before, but definitely in the event that an allegation of sexual abuse is made against a program staff member.

Various authors have dealt with the issue of child sexual abuse. Sandford (1980), Finklehor (1980), and Groth (1978) gave a full picture of the characteristics of offenders and victims, the varying degrees of exploitation of children, statistics regarding the molestation of boys and girls, the frequency of family-related offenders (e.g. incest), and the common pattern of a gradually intensifying relationship that escalates into secret games and sexual abuse.

Koblinsky and Behana (1984) have addressed the role of educators in prevention detection and intervention. Various Personal Safety Curricula are available (Crisci, 1983; Beland, 1986), as are books for parents (Fay, 1979; Hart-Rossi, 1984) and books to be read to children (Freeman, 1982). In addition, one must mention that there are also sections in supermarkets and department stores with inappropriately labelled abuse prevention

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materials for preschoolers. These tend to emphasize "Stranger Danger" content rather than the essential prevention concepts of the right to say no, assertiveness activities, refusing to play "secret" games with adults, becoming aware of whom to turn to when you are troubled, and discussing types of touching.

More recently, articles have appeared giving information to child care programs about: reporting abuse (Murray, 1985; Meddin and Rosen, 1986), teaching prevention skills (Ellis, 1985; Plummer, 1986), selecting prevention materials (Jalongo, 1985), and discussing the issue of physical contact between teachers and children (Mazur & Pekor, 1985).

I began this article in hopes of offering some guidelines for Early Childhood programs in establishing Comprehensive Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs, as well as some suggestions for coping with an allegation of institutional abuse. In so doing, I have drawn from some other sources, including a manual for child care administrators by Gerka and Sonneborn (1986). The suggestions below are not meant to be definitive and will most likely raise more issues concerning the values and daily practice of child care than they solve. However, protection of both staff and children can be enhanced in part by raising the consciousness of child care professionals and by encouraging all of us to examine daily practices that are often taken for granted.

What is a Comprehensive Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program?

I. Classroom Policies and Strategies

II. In-service Teacher Training, Committee Work, and Orientation to All the Components of the Prevention Program

III. A Personal Safety Curriculum

IV. Parent/Teacher Dialogues and Meetings

V. Administrative Policies and Procedures

VI. An Administrator's Plan for Coping With an Allegation of Institutional Child Abuse

I. Classroom Policies and Strategies:

With teaching staff, develop detailed, written procedures for diapering and toileting children. These include who is authorized to diaper children, how toileting "accidents" are documented, and who is authorized to supervise toileting expectations for children's mastery of self-help skills, etc.

With teaching staff, develop and write Naptime Policies that include designation of naptime supervisors, qualifications of staff and how many staff are to be in nap room, and specifically how children are to be physically soothed at naptime, etc..

Teach staff how to observe children's behavior systematically and how to record it in objective language. Be sure your record keeping and child assessment procedures are occurring and that they yield objective behavioral data about children.

Write a discipline plan that specifies the progression of guidance strategies from physical to verbal control, according to developmental levels, that will assist in clarifying expected techniques and hopefully preventing allegations of institutional physical abuse.

Develop back-up emergency procedures for what a staff member is to do when he/she must be alone with a child out of sight of any other employee, especially if this involves toileting and changing the child's clothes. Also, specify how such incidents are to be documented and filed.

Examine the physical environment for visibility, especially during naptime. Evaluate the bathrooms. Make physical renovations as the program judges advisable (e.g., wide-angle mirrors, "viewing" windows, Dutch doors, etc.).

II. In-service Teacher Training, Committee Work, and Orientation to All the Components of the Prevention Program:

Educate staff about the extent and dynamics of child sexual abuse. Train staff so that they know and can implement your agency's written child abuse reporting procedures. (Write up such procedures if you have not already done so.)

Make supervisors aware of abuse prevention policies and procedures and ensure that they include these in the supervision process.

As a child care agency, develop the commitment that we must treat every allegation of sexual abuse seriously and equally (even if made against a staff member). Work with child care staff so that they can understand and (in time) adopt a proactive attitude to allegations and investigations; and so that they believe that false allegations are necessary and to be expected, since the intent of the law is to encourage reporting of suspicions of abuse. Become collectively aware that if we train staff and raise the consciousness of parents regarding the realities of child sexual abuse, we will be encouraging more reports and thus, more investigations.

Be aware that, given the statistics of abuse (1 in 4 females and 1 in 11 males will be sexually abused by the time they are 18) and given that the median age of onset of sexual abuse is between 4 and 6 years, agencies might well expect to report suspicions if they are knowledgeable and trained to recognize symptoms. The statistics indicate that there are children in our care right now who are being sexually molested. As Early Childhood professionals, the question we must ask is: "Are we truly listening to children and becoming aware of their behavioral cues?"

Build policy and committee work into your staff structure. Engage staff in writing and revising procedures, as well as in monitoring the implementation of policies and procedures. Essentially, allow time and authority for staff to create professional codes of conduct for themselves. Look closely at the medical profession and police work for examples of preventive procedures (e.g., no male performs a gynecological exam without a third party present). Finally, expect staff to be professional in following policy even when "not following" seems of little risk or is more convenient. Staff should monitor themselves and colleagues to insure that they do not put themselves in "high risk" situations.

Teach staff how to analyze problem behavior and to know what and when to share concerns with parents. Have staff "role play" handling a "self

disclosure" by a child or an "obvious" manifestation of symptoms that could be indicative of sexual abuse. Who reports? How are parents notified, and when: before or after? Does staff know what criteria to use to make judgments concerning a child's behavior and a "reportable condition?"

III. A Personal Safety Curriculum:

The basic components of a personal safety curriculum include:

A. Anatomically correct names for body parts
B. Assertiveness skills
C. The right to privacy
D. Differences in personal touches (the touch continuum)
E. Verbalizing about unwanted touches (using your personal touch)
F. Knowing whom to go to when troubled.

Review your program philosophy and daily practices from the point of view of building personal safety skills. Define program goals (such as building self-esteem, your discipline/problem-solving practices, and the right of children not to participate in a given activity) so that they all take on new meaning from the personal safety perspective. For example, allowing a restless or disruptive child the right to choose "to read" in the quiet corner during circle time supports a developing sense of child autonomy in relationship to adults and groups. Similarly, a discipline policy which encourages problem-solving among preschoolers instead of adult-dictated solutions discourages the view that one always does what adults command. In potential sexual abuse situations, children need to trust their own judgment of their needs, and they need to be able to assertively disagree or refuse to comply with an adult.

Implement elements of a personal safety curriculum tailored to each specific classroom and to the values that emerge in the discussions held with the parents of the children enrolled in that classsroom. Send home written updates on activities. Keep the dialogue alive.

IV. Parent/Teacher Dialogues and Meetings:

Teachers and administrators meet with parents to inform them of the statistics of child sexual abuse, of what they, as parents, can do to prevent the abuse of their child, and of the fact that 85% of child sexual abuse occurs with a known adolescent or adult to whom the parent has entrusted the child's care and friendship. Tell parents that child care workers are mandated reporters under certain state laws. Be prepared for denial and resistance by parents, even anger. Inform them of the components of a child sexual abuse prevention curriculum for preschoolers. Gain their support (through dialogue and the availability of prevention materials) to begin the implementation of the curriculum at home and at school. Stress the importance of allowing the child to accept and reject "touches" from significant others--especially relatives! Children need to know what to do in a situation of inappropriate touch as much as they need to know what to do when a fire breaks out or when they cross the street.

Encourage parents (in writing) to make unannounced visits to the center at all times of the day. Stress the partnership of parents and teachers in efforts to protect children.

Create a written statement for parents about your agency's prevention program. Outline the basic elements of your prevention curriculum, the teachers' responsibilities as mandated reporters, and the role of the child protective agency. If you have a plan for coping with an allegation of institutional abuse, you can outline definition of terms, issues of criminality and confidentiality, the different investigatory agencies, and what kind of communication from administrators parents might reasonably expect.

V. Administrative Policies and Procedures:

Review your screening procedures for hiring new employees, always check written references by phone, and consider asking one reference for the name of another person not identified by the candidate. Remember that you have a legal responsibility to prevent the inadvertent hiring of a sex offender.

Summarize the laws in your state that specify teachers as mandated reporters (including definitions of abuse and the role of the state's child protective unit) and give a copy to every staff member.

Prepare Reporting Procedures that outline specific steps for staff to follow when they suspect abuse, whether institutional or not.

Review your personnel policies and determine ahead of time (in writing) whether and when an alleged offender would be assigned other duties or suspended with or without pay, etc.

Gerka and Sonneborn (1986) suggest that you give considerable attention to your written personnel policies in regard to this matter. They advise that you carefully consider (in advance) the financial liability to the program of suspension with pay while hiring a substitute, as investigations of allegations can take months. In addition, you need to consider the financial plight of a staff member who has been suspended without pay or terminated.

From my point of view, the ethical issues involved in this type of decision are enormous. Is one not innocent until proven guilty? Yet termination or suspension without pay from one's job can be construed as evidence of the program's lack of faith in the person's behavior.

Retain/consult a lawyer on the legal issues and liabilities involved when a staff member is alleged to have committed child abuse.

Finally, evaluate your budget and fee structure with the multiple goal of protecting children and staff by:

A. Providing for two adults to be within eyesight of each other at all times when caring for children.

B. Providing permanent substitute(s) trained in the procedures, philosophy, and abuse prevention strategies of your program.

C. Utilizing that same person or persons to "cover" so that staff can meet together on paid time to write procedures, evaluate environments, problem-solve staffing issues, plan for personal safety curriculum implementation and parent discussions, engage in supervision for professional growth, and evaluate children's behavior in a clinical/professional

way. In short, change the budget to provide for professional "not-with-children" time during the normal working day for staff to reflect on their own and the children's behavior in a professional and timely manner.

VI. An Administrator's Plan for Coping With an Allegation of Institutional Child Abuse. Suggestions include:

A. Immediately remove the person in question from contact with children. Do not wait until an investigatory agency tells you to do so. This is for the staff member's protection as well as sensible ethical practice to protect the alleged or potential victims.

B. The moment you learn of, or decide to make, a report of institutional abuse, immediately assume the responsibility to document your activity and to gather information regarding the day in question, including staffing patterns, and procedural irregularities, etc. It is crucial that you take care not to obstruct the investigations by state agencies and that you carry out your legal reporting responsibilities. Any information you gather should be shared with state investigators.

C. Talk immediately with the staff of the center in question. Establish your own initiative in communications before alternative advisors (e.g.,lawyers) and various state agencies dictate or circumscribe your relationship with your staff.

D. Careful consideration shall be given to when to communicate with parents, being sure to inform them before the case becomes public (usually around the time of the District Attorney's involvement). The direct approach of one or more parent meetings appears preferable to the use of letters. At this time, procedures and terminology (such as the meaning of a "substantiated allegation") would be explained. Parents need to be aware that the Child Care Program will most likely have very little or no information regarding the progress of the various investigations. Partly because child abuse falls under criminal law and partly because the issue is emotionally charged, issues of confidentiality and libel are significant. University Child Care recognizes that this aspect may be in conflict with parental needs to protect their child by gaining information regarding any possible threat to their child. This issue of how and what to inform parents during an allegation of institutional child abuse may be considered on a case-by-case basis under guidance from University lawyers and administrators.

E. Make a plan in advance for coping with the media.

1. Consider whether to announce that a staff member has been relieved of teaching duties. Times and circumstances should inform your decision on this issue.

2. If the administrator can ascertain that the relevant policies and procedures had been followed on the day in question (for example, that another staff member had been present and, therefore, could describe the interaction be-

tween the alleged perpetrator and the alleged victim) and could determine that the actions of the staff member had a plausible explanation, then one could consider making statements to the effect that:

a) We support the investigation into the possible abuse of a child and are cooperating fully in the investigations.

b) We are confident that the center's policies and procedures were followed, and we believe there has been no criminal or inappropriate behavior on the part of the center's staff.

3. TV cameras and "investigatory reporters" come with the territory. Designate a spokesperson (to be interviewed by the TV reporters) ready with a proactive message about the statistics of child sexual abuse, about how important it is for all of us to support sexual abuse investigations even if it is painful, and about the fact that "great harm can be caused to an individual by premature assumptions or acknowledgements of accusations." The following quote from a D.A.'s press release might be used:

"...The harm (that can be) caused to an individual or a program by premature and irresponsible acknowledgements of allegations or accusations is enormous, and once a suspicion is made public, it is almost impossible to remove the taint. It is our hope that the public will,...show... respect for the reputations, feelings, and concerns of others, as well as honor the confidentiality of those involved."

Gerka and Sonneborn (1986) advocate identifying one individual in advance who will be the contact for the media. They advise that you consider someone on the Board of Directors (someone who is one or more steps removed from the Child Care Administrator). It is important that this person be able to say in response to questions, "I'll look into this," "It's under consideration," or "No comment." Staff need to be advised that having one person talking to the media will be positive.

4. Staff and parents may be advised not to talk to the media because when many persons answer reporters' questions, conflicting information may appear, thus fueling the sensationalistic aspects of media attention. Parents and staff are advised to respect the role of the designated University spokesperson and to direct all questions from all sources to this person.

F. Frequent visits to the classrooms and informal talks with parents are a means of providing much-needed tangible evidence of support to the teachers and confidence in their performance. Teachers can undergo incredible stress during an allegation of institutional abuse. Parents are distressed and usually ask questions that staff either cannot answer or should not answer in terms of confidentiality concerns. Teachers may be accosted in supermarkets. Children are often tense at school, and child management issues may increase the

stress. During an allegation, administrators can become immersed in activities such as communicating with external agencies, dealing with the media, and making decisions regarding parent communications, etc. At this time, teachers need the visible support of the administration.

CONCLUSION

Although allegations of institutional abuse are threatening and painful events for Early Childhood educators, much professional growth in proactive abuse prevention work can be achieved in preparing for such an eventuality. Children can be taught the beginnings of abuse prevention skills. Parents can become informed of the issues and be supportive of program efforts to prevent abuse. Teachers and administrators can embark on a collaborative professional effort to revise and draft policies, to examine everyday practices in light of sexual abuse prevention training, and to analyze program goals from the perspective of abuse prevention. The clinical skills of observing and evaluating children's behavior may be enhanced.

The primary goal of the development of a Comprehensive Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program may be increased protection of children from molestation, but there are many potential secondary outcomes such as increased staff awareness, professional engagement, program and policy development, evaluation of classroom practices, and protection of staff from allegations.

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